

## THE MUMMY TENT

By Kimberley Griffiths Little

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MORNING SUNLIGHT baked the streets of the city as Imarus hurried back to the mummy tent with the basket of linens.

It was so hot he could hardly breathe. Not a whisper of air stirred the canopies shading the marketplace. Trickle of sweat ran down his neck. He was tempted to jump into the Nile to cool off, but hungry crocodiles swam in the river, and Imarus did not plan to be a crocodile's lunch.

The mummy tents were busy during the flooding season. The Nile fever had taken many people to the afterlife, and mummy priests were working long days, preparing the dead for burial. It was such an important task that those who performed the mummification belonged to the higher orders of the priesthood. Imarus was proud that his father, Nebhotep, was the Chief Embalmer and entrusted by the vizier of Pharaoh to create a safe journey for the dead as they traveled to the world of the afterlife.

The tents were so busy, in fact, that weavers were staying longer at their looms to make extra cloth for the wrapping. Imarus's lessons on the embalming process had been put on hold. He had become an errand boy again, warming wax and oils and fetching natron salt.

His back ached from the heavy basket as he maneuvered through the streets. Imarus passed women bartering, children playing tag, merchants haggling over prices, and farmers with wagons full of goods creaking down the dusty road.

Unexpectedly, the din around him suddenly quieted, and Imarus's head shot up. A procession was making its way down the main road. The closer it got, the bigger it became. Somebody important was traveling this direction.

Might it actually be Pharaoh himself? Imarus felt his heart beat a little faster.

Whispers raced through the crowd, "...son of Pharaoh ... returning home from his summer retreat."

Soldiers in war finery, gripping the reins of their chariots, were the first to pass. Priestesses wearing flowing white dresses and flowers in their hair danced by in slow, graceful movements. Temple priests with shaven heads, dark glowing bodies, and white cloths about their waists carried bowls of incense and offerings.

In the center of the procession swayed a veiled litter carried by strong, muscular men. Slaves waiving fans of palm fiber shielded the litter from the pounding sun.

Suddenly a young girl in the procession, lagging behind to pick up her fallen flowers, tripped and fell. She'd caught her foot under the hoofs of a horse prancing behind her. The horse reared, snorting loudly. The chariot driver swerved, shouting as he tried to maintain control.

Without thinking, Imarus pushed his way through the crowd. He crouched and examined a bleeding gash on the girl's ankle. Jagged stones lay like knives in the roadway, churned up by the horses and chariots.

Temple priests crowded around the girl while others held curious onlookers at bay.

"Who are you?" a sharp voice asked Imarus.

"I am Imarus, son of Nebhotep, Chief Embalmer. I can help her."

"How can an embalmer treat an injury?" The man was skeptical. "You are no healer."

"I have supplies. Please let me try," Imarus said. There was no time to explain that the embalmers of the mummy tents knew much about the body, skin, and blood.

Dark kohl-lined eyes looked up at him. The injured girl was probably not more than ten years old. "It hurts," she whispered, tears slipping down her pale cheeks.

Quickly, Imarus took a roll of linen and ripped a length of it with his teeth. He pressed the bandage firmly over the cut to staunch the bleeding.

Another priest ran up. He was tall, broad, and clean-shaven, and fear shone in his eyes.

"My father," the girl said softly.

The priest lifted her in his arms and moved her out of the roadway to a safer spot.

“I need some wine,” Imarus called out. Embalmers used wine to clean the body during mummification.

Within moments, a jar of palm wine appeared. Imarus soaked a second piece of linen with the liquid and cleansed the girl’s wound.

As Imarus tore a third piece of linen, the procession started up again. A small breeze lifted a corner of the prince’s veiled litter, and Imarus ducked his head so that he would not be caught looking at the son of Pharaoh. But for one split second he saw the black eyes of the prince peering out from behind the swathe of veils.

Imarus shivered and then bent to his task. He carefully wrapped the girl’s leg with the linen, closing the skin tightly where it had torn open.

“Be sure the court physician applies turmeric or henna,” Imarus told the girl’s father. “The herbs will help close the wound. It might need to be stitched.”

The man lifted his daughter into his arms again, and she laid her head on his shoulder. “Thank you for your help,” he said, looking Imarus in the eye. “I am Fahlwa, priest of the inner court of the palace. This is my daughter, Saratii.”

Imarus gulped. This man was a High Priest, one who waited on Pharaoh himself.

“My name is Imarus, son of Nebhotep, Chief Embalmer.”

“I will pray the gods bless you and your father.”

Imarus gave a bow and said thank you. When he glanced up again, Fahlwa and his daughter had disappeared down the road.

A WEEK LATER Imarus was still busy making sure bags of natron were at hand, wax and oils heated, and linens available in enormous quantities.

Across the crowded mummy tent, Nebhotep, the Chief Embalmer, gave directions. He clapped his hands briskly, his powerful voice rising above the hustle and bustle. Someday, Imarus would become a mummy priest like his father if Anubis, the jackal-headed God of Embalming, wished it to be so.

Imarus looked up at the shelf where the stone figure of Anubis stood poised and regal, watching over the mummy tent operations on the West Bank of the Nile.

For days, Anubis had been staring directly at Imarus. Every time Imarus moved, he felt the god's eyes following him. Anubis's presence pursued him like a shadow as if a spirit of the underworld breathed in his ear.

Imarus knew it was not good to displease the gods—and today Anubis seemed to be frowning. What did it mean?

Imarus picked up the record book for the wrapping room and unrolled the scroll, fumbling under the watchful eyes of Anubis. The scribes did the actual recording, but Nebhotep wanted his son to study the entries as well. Mummification took seventy days, and every stage had to be done accurately and at the proper time.

Priests chanted prayers and spells from *The Book of Coming Forth by Day* as they moved from table to table. They stopped to begin the wrapping of an old man who had been one of Pharaoh's personal scribes.

Wrapping the prepared corpse was one of the last stages of embalming. Several linen shrouds were placed about the body. Then the priests took long strips of cloth and wrapped them around the head and neck. The priests worked the strips of cloth down each arm and leg. Lastly, they wrapped each individual finger and toe. Every mummy had at least five layers, and priests spent two weeks completing the task.

Imarus looked up as servants from Pharaoh's palace entered the tent. They carried baskets of jewelry: beads, rings, bracelets, and amulets. The priests would place the jewelry and sacred amulets on the body under each layer of linen.

"Come, Imarus," Nebhotep said, appearing beside him. "We have a new project to begin."

Salatis, a nobleman, had arrived at the tent door. His son had died two days ago from the fever. The man wept as he carried his son's body into the large room.

The body of the boy was laid on one of the tables. Priests were summoned to begin the first prayers.

Imarus looked at the boy and felt a shiver run down his spine. Salatis's son was even younger than he was. Sometimes Imarus thought that he would like to learn the art of healing. He wished he could prevent the deaths of young children who arrived at the mummy tents too soon. But it was blasphemy to think it. His calling was to follow his father's footsteps. He stole a glance at Anubis, wondering if the God of Embalming could read his unworthy thoughts.

The first part of mummification went quickly. The priests removed the internal organs to prevent the body from decaying. They began with the brain. It was not very important. A person's heart was the center of his or her soul; it was the most important part of the body and the only organ that remained intact.

A priest unrolled a long scroll made of papyrus. In a low, melodic voice he began to say the prayers for the extraction stage.

Another priest brought in four painted clay jars. Each jar's lid represented the head of a god. The first jar held the liver, with the man-shaped Imsety on the lid. The second jar held the intestines, with a lid in the shape of Qebehsenuf, a falcon. Hapy, with the shape of a baboon on the third jar, held the lungs. The last jar was for the stomach, and its lid portrayed Duamutef, a jackal. The internal organs would be washed, anointed, and wrapped in linen to preserve them. The four jars would then be entombed with the owner.

Imarus glanced up at Anubis again, unable to stop himself. "Look at Anubis," he whispered. "He does not look happy today."

Nebhotep frowned when he saw Anubis's dark, angry eyes.

"Perhaps Anubis wants me to check on the other priests' work," Nebhotep said, a note of worry creeping into his voice.

The body of Akunosh lay on another table in the tent. He was an old man who had been a rug merchant. His body had been covered in natron salt for forty days so that now he was perfectly dried out. Tomorrow the oilings would begin.

A second table held a woman, the wife of a farmer. She had died from a serpent bite. Imarus watched the priests pour liquid resin over her body. Next they would rub the skin with cedar oil and wax. The oils kept the skin soft so that it would not become brittle and crack and fall off the skeleton. Soon the bandaging would begin for the old woman.

In a corner, slaves sat tearing cloth into long, narrow strips. It took dozens of yards just to wrap a single mummy. Weavers in the city created cartloads of linen cloth, but some people brought linens from their own personal supply for members of their family.

The last room of the mummy tent was where the artists worked. Imarus liked to peek inside the curtains and see the colorful paintings they created for the sarcophaguses.

The artists also painted face masks to put over the mummies' faces in the coffins. The masks looked exactly like the people when they were alive. Once a mummy was wrapped and in the tomb, the mask helped a person's ka, or spirit, locate the correct body so that they could reunite.

Suddenly a commotion sounded behind Imarus. He turned from the curtains as a group of high-ranking Temple Priests arrived at the main entrance.

One of Pharaoh's Chief Temple Priests strode forward. His dark-skinned face radiated strength and power. The robes over his simple white loincloth glowed blood red, and gold jewelry hung on his wrists and neck and ankles.

Nebhotep quickly left the table where he'd been working. He bowed deeply, greeting the High Priest and welcoming him. "Have you come with the funeral barge?"

The Temple Priest spoke with a deep, booming voice. "No, I have come on a different matter."

Nebhotep gave a small bow and waited.

Imarus watched his father, knowing the visit had caught Nebhotep off guard. His father had to be wondering if something had gone awry, but his face remained calm and impassive, not betraying his thoughts and concerns.

"There is word that you have a son," the Temple Priest said.

Imarus felt his knees go weak, and his heart began to pound. What had happened? Had he erred in one of his duties? Perhaps Anubis had been trying to tell him something all day—and he had not been listening properly. He had not read the signs.

Nebhotep nodded slowly and beckoned Imarus to come to him.

Imarus thought he might pass out from fear. Or maybe the heat. The room was suddenly stifling.

"My son is called Imarus," Nebhotep said. "He stands beside me."

The grand and wondrous High Priest stared at Imarus with dark, searching eyes. “Word has come to the great god, Pharaoh, that your son has been given a special gift. I am here with a message from Pharaoh himself.”

Nebhotep gave a small smile. “Anubis must be pleased with Imarus.”

The Priest shook his head. “No, not Anubis. The God of the Dead, Osiris, has decreed that Imarus will not become a mummy priest.”

Imarus felt his throat go dry. Gasps of surprise erupted around the mummy tent.

The Temple Priest’s black eyes seemed to penetrate Imarus’s very soul. “His gift is not for the dead. I have come to tell you that your son has been summoned to the palace. Inside the palace temple he will study with the court physicians. His gift is to be used for the living. For Pharaoh and his family.”

Imarus was speechless.

*Pharaoh had called for him.*

To be a servant to Pharaoh was the greatest honor in Egypt. Greater than anything else, for Pharaoh was the god of all gods.

Imarus tried to swallow. He tried to think, but his mind could form no words.

The Chief Temple Priest gave Imarus a long, hard look. “The gods have spoken.”

Nebhotep bowed his head. “I will send Imarus to the palace tomorrow.”

“Pharaoh will be pleased.” The High Priest swished his fine robes and left the mummy tent, his entourage following in their silk and finery. Imarus felt dizzy watching them depart.

After a moment of stunned silence, Nebhotep grasped Imarus’s hands. “Son,” he said softly, and his voice choked on the word. “I never dreamed that an honor such as this would come to the house of Nebhotep. To my own son.”

Imarus embraced his father as a thousand thoughts whirled inside his head. He glanced around the mummy tents, at the servants and the priests he knew so well. They smiled at him, then returned to their work.

“Come, Imarus,” his father added. “There is much to do before the morning’s sunrise when we present you at the palace.”

Imarus began to follow, then halted in his steps. Quickly, he looked up at Anubis, the God of Embalming. Anubis was staring down at Imarus. But the god was no longer frowning.

Anubis, the god who knew everything, was finally smiling.

